THE USE OF HUMORS IN COMEDY BY BEN JONSON AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

BY

ROBERT VAN AKIN BAUER

A. B., North Central College, 1937

A. M., University of Illinois, 1938

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
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In virtually every literary history or critical study that deals with the English drama of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a discussion is included of a type of comedy called the comedy of humors, and Ben Jonson is given credit for developing and propounding comedy of this type. The definitions of humor comedy given by the critics have too often been so general that they do not exclude comedies not termed humor comedies, or they have been so limited that they do not include all of even Jonson's dramatic practice. It is clear that Jonson was experimenting with a new type of comedy when he first achieved prominence as a playwright, but the nature of his experiment and its effect on his later comedies and on his contemporaries and the question of whether he adhered to a special theory of humor comedy throughout his career or during any one period have not been studied in detail to determine whether there is a comedy of humors of sufficiently distinctive character to warrant its discussion as a separate type.

In studying the use of humors in comedy I have dealt briefly with the classical background of the comedy of the late sixteenth century and Jonson's attitude toward the classics. Next I have surveyed the medical background of humors to bring out the prevalence of knowledge of humors in the 1590's and the meanings of the word *humor* in use in that period; the evidence offered by contemporary dictionaries and popular medical works has been included. I have then reviewed the following aspects of Jonson's dramatic practice:

(1) His use of the word *humor* (and derived words such as *humorous, humorist,* etc.).
(2) Statements about humors in prologues and inductions.
(3) Expository elements in the comedies designed to

present and explain characters, and mention of humors in these passages.

(4) The relation of Jonson's characterization to the humors.

(5) The relation of Jonson's plot construction to the humors.

From this study I have summarized the identifying characteristics of Jonson's dramatic practice in relation to humors. Finally I have considered representative comedies of Jonson's contemporaries up to the closing of the theaters in 1642 to determine the extent of Jonson's influence in his own lifetime and to determine whether there is a type of comedy that may justifiably be called a comedy of humors and if so what the characteristics of the type are.

The intensive use of humors in English comedy appeared at the end of the sixteenth century. It may have been Chapman who first wrote comedies with extraordinary emphasis on humors (*An Humorous Day's Mirth,* 1597), but it was Jonson who took up the idea, developed it, and gave to the comedy of humors such definition and distinguishing characteristics as it had. Chapman and Jonson had numerous precedents, in both the native English literary tradition and the classical tradition, for the characters with dominating peculiarities that they presented as humors in their early comedies. By the time they began to write comedies, Plautus and Terence had long been favorite subjects of study in the schools, and academic performances of Roman comedies were frequent. Plays modeled on Roman comedy were popular, and in the 1590's conventional characters and stock situations from Roman comedy had been well assimilated into the English drama and were often employed by playwrights writing for the professional theaters. But Jonson always maintained a vigorous independence in his attitude toward both the English drama and the classics. Though he respected and understood the spirit and precepts of the ancients, and censured the drama of his contemporaries for its extravagance and improprieties, he also frequently stated

that the classical rules should be interpreted with intelligence and could be modified to suit present needs. In the induction to *Every Man out of His Humor* he said that the "*Terentian* manner" was "too nice," too strict, and cited many Greek and Latin writers of comedy who did not hesitate to depart from the rules set down by their predecessors. He had no use for writers who were "nothing but form."

The conventionalized characters in the literature of the late sixteenth century, whether they were derived from examples in Roman comedy or from personifications of virtues and vices in the native English moralities, usually had one dominating peculiarity or aberration of character. Such ridiculous eccentricities or vices were frequently called humors, long before Chapman and Jonson wrote their first comedies; for example, in the works of Lyly, Nashe, Greene, and Lodge, among Jonson's immediate predecessors, peculiar personality traits are often called humors. It appears that the concept of humors was popular knowledge and the use of the words *humor, humorous,* etc., was a fad in popular speech at the end of the century.

The concept of humors, of course, arose from ancient theories of physiology. The body was thought to contain four liquids, or humors: blood, choler, phlegm, and melancholy. When these four were in their proper proportion and balance, the body was in a state of mental and physical health. When the humors were out of balance the body was sick. Airy substances called spirits were thought to arise from the humors and communicate to the brain and the reason; consequently, the humors affected mental as well as physical health. Of great importance in spreading knowledge of the humors were popular medical books, a large number of which appeared in the sixteenth century. Many such works were occasioned by the frequent outbreaks of plague and other epidemics. Most of these books mention and explain the nature and function of the humors.

Concurrently with the interest in the physical humors,

there rapidly developed in non-medical works numerous meanings of the word *humor* that are often only vaguely related to the original meanings. By the 1590's the word had come to be used loosely as a synonym for mood, temperament, disposition, eccentricity, folly, mania, whim, etc. Contemporary dictionaries and word lists do not record these various meanings; usually they define *humor* simply as "liquid" or "moisture." Perhaps the dictionary makers ignored the popular meanings because their works were usually intended as aids in reading and translating the classics and made no attempt to record popular usage. Popular literature of the time, however, gives ample evidence of the vogue of the various loose meanings.

The concept of humors, then, was ready-made for the dramatist to use in writing satirical comedy. Through both medical and non-medical works the physical and psychological meanings of the word *humor* had become popular knowledge by the end of the sixteenth century, and the practice of applying the term to eccentric characters in literature had become well established. Chapman and Jonson were innovators in that they gave more emphasis and prominence to humors than they had ever been accorded before.

Throughout his career Jonson wrote satirical comedies, aiming his shafts at courtiers, poetasters, misers, alchemists, Puritans, would-be wits, etc. He always had his eye on contemporary life, but he did not always accomplish his satire by relating the objects of his ridicule to the humors. All the evidence I have been able to draw from my study of Jonson's comedies shows that his interest in humors was short-lived, extending from about 1597 to 1601. Of the comedies he wrote during those years, *Every Man out of His Humor* and *Cynthia's Revels* are different from his other early comedies and from all his later comedies. All his comedies show a respect for such classical rules as he thought were needful; some of them observe the unities of time, place, and action; all (except *The New Inn, A Tale of a Tub,* and

the fragmentary *The Sad Shepherd*) are didactic and satirical. Such are the general characteristics of his comedy. But these characteristics do not add up to a theory of humor comedy; they do not, in fact, show any direct connection with humors at all.

Jonson designated *Every Man out of His Humor* and *Cynthia's Revels* as "comicall satyres," and these two comedies, I contend, may be appropriately termed comedies of humors. In the induction to the former he gives his only complete definition of *humor*, and humors are spoken of more frequently in these two plays than in any others. The satirized characters are each possessed of a predominant folly or vice that is called a humor, and the *raison d'être* of each play is the display of these humors and the reform or purging of them at the end. All action is devised for this display and purge; there is no other story. When the follies and vices have been exhibited under various circumstances, have been abetted and remarked upon by certain characters who act as demonstrators or commentators, the cure is effected and the play comes to an end. *Every Man out* and *Cynthia's Revels* are the only two that are designed for such an end and that follow such a pattern.

If the term comedy of humors is to have any value as the designation of a particular kind of comedy, the word *humor* must be defined and used as carefully as Jonson defined and used it in *Every Man out* and *Cynthia's Revels*. If humors are considered the equivalent of manners—as Jonson considered them in the prologue to *The Alchemist* and the induction to *The Magnetic Lady*—or if humor is taken to be synonymous with mood, temperament, disposition, eccentricity, folly, mania, whim, or with any others of the various meanings that were current from 1590 to 1642, both before and after Jonson made his definition in 1599, then comedy of humors becomes the equivalent of comedy of manners, or else it becomes a classification that is so broad and vague that it has no significance or usefulness. Only in

Every Man out and *Cynthia's Revels* did Jonson use the word *humor* in a consistently restricted meaning. To paraphrase his definition in *Every Man out,* a humor, when applied to a dramatic character, signifies "one peculiar quality" that draws all the energies, thoughts, and actions of a person to run in one direction. Jonson here keeps the meaning of the word close to its original physical and psychological meanings, and corrects the abnormality of character by means of a purge, as a doctor might have tried to correct an excess of melancholy or phlegm. In Jonson the purge is accomplished by shaming and ridiculing the fools into regret and repentance, but the purge may be physical by metaphor: the waters of Helicon are prescribed for the self-loving courtiers in *Cynthia's Revels,* and Crispinus is made to vomit his offensive words. At the same time as the critics and commentators in these comedies were using the words according to Jonson's limited definition, the author was ridiculing careless use of the word in the speeches of his satirized characters. Only occasionally in Jonson's other comedies or in the comedies of his contemporaries is a similar concern shown for careful use of the word *humor.*

Taking the limited definition of *humor* that was given in *Every Man out,* one may define a humor character as one that is dominated by such a peculiar quality. It is important that the audience recognize the humor, for the purpose of presenting such a character is to represent a moral weakness or social folly that is to be satirized. The satire fails if the spectators do not recognize and identify the vice or folly. The character, therefore, is simplified so that the eccentricity is his most noticeable and most memorable feature. In a comedy of humors, the eccentricity of each satirized character is labeled a humor so that it is connected with ill health, mental or physical, resulting from physical humors out of balance. A comedy of humors, therefore, may be defined as a comedy in which the author's sole purpose is to exhibit and satirize moral defections and social follies

by representing them as humors governing his characters. The humors are made evident to the audience by prominent use of exposition to explain them, and by demonstrators and commentators who exhibit the humors, show them to be ridiculous, and purge them.

It may appear that undue emphasis has been placed on the labeling of a character's trait as a humor. A character, it may be argued, may possess one peculiar quality (or be possessed by one) even if the author does not term the peculiarity a humor. Could not a character that has one dominant eccentricity be called a humor character even if the word is not used in conjunction with him in the play? My contention is that it is not justifiable or logical to do so. Unless the peculiarity is called a humor and unless it conforms to the limitations given in the definition above, the character does not differ in any essential way from thousands of other comic characters.

Though Chapman in *An Humorous Day's Mirth* was the first to produce a comedy that gave extraordinary emphasis to humors, he discarded the type in his subsequent work. In his later comedies he was primarily interested in romantic love stories, only occasionally in satire. *Sir Giles Goosecap, Knight* is the only later comedy of Chapman's that bears much resemblance to Jonson's early comedies, and even in this one there is not much talk of humors.

In Marston we have Jonson's satirical spirit, even more vituperatively and cynically expressed, but still no example of a play that follows *Every Man out* or *Cynthia's Revels* in structure or more than occasionally in characterization. Marston always used a romantic and melodramatic plot, relieved or lightened by a rather farcical subplot that contained the satirical representations of eccentric characters. He never devoted an entire play to satire as Jonson did. And the objects of Marston's satire tend to be the conventional targets of the verse satirists of the 1590's: fops, swaggerers, sycophants, lechers, etc. The conventional nature of

Marston's satirized characters points ahead to the often repeated types of the 1630's.

Shakespeare showed acute awareness of the humor fashion and ridiculed it in the speeches of Nym in *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* In *Twelfth Night* he superlatively adapted the character of the gull, not unlike Jonson's, in Malvolio. But the important difference between Malvolio and a humor character is that Malvolio is more than the representation of a vice or folly that is ridiculed and purged. He is the satire of a social climber and a self-centered fool, but he is more real and more human than Jonson's humor characters are intended to be. Malvolio more nearly resembles the memorable characterizations that Jonson achieved in the comedies of his middle period.

Dekker and Middleton reflect the typical attitudes of dramatists of the period toward humors. They occasionally use the word in connection with a satirized character but show no interest in producing a comedy in the style of *Every Man out* and *Cynthia's Revels.* In the plays of John Day that were published between 1606 and 1608, especially in *The Isle of Gulls* and *Humour out of Breath,* we have some rather self-conscious comments on the humors. Day makes clear in certain passages that humors were fashionable in the few years before and after 1600. He makes fun of humors, somewhat as Shakespeare had earlier, by excessive use of the word in certain scenes, and on one occasion puts into the mouth of a character the comment that "humours are pickt so neare the bone" that there are scarcely any left to be had. I take this as an indication that, in Day's opinion at least, humors had become hackneyed. Even Nathan Field, who was a sort of pupil and protégé of Jonson, does not show much interest in humors in his two comedies, *A Woman is a Weathercock* and *Amends for Ladies.* Jonson's comment in the induction to *Bartholomew Fair*—the author "has not hit the humors, he do's not know 'em"—seems to sum up Jonson's attitude toward humors after 1601 and the general attitude

of his contemporaries during his early and middle periods.

There is not a great deal more to say in summary of the work of other dramatists contemporary with Jonson with respect to their use of humors. In the plays of the Beaumont and Fletcher group, in the realistic comedies of Jonson's "servant" Richard Brome, and in the comedies of Shirley there are characters and situations that were imitated from or modeled upon Jonson's, but there was no outright attempt to perpetuate the kind of comedy Jonson presented in *Every Man out of His Humor* and *Cynthia's Revels,* the two that I think may justifiably be called comedies of humors. In addition to the writers mentioned, later contemporaries such as Massinger, Davenport, Randolph, Marmion, Nabbes, Davenant, Cartwright, Glapthorne, Carlell, May, Cokain, Mayne, Cowley, and other writers of comedy show Jonson's influence, and occasionally they created characters with single dominant peculiarities that were sometimes called humors. But the Jonsonian characters and scenes most often imitated were from *The Silent Woman, Volpone,* and *The Alchemist,* plays of a period when Jonson's own interest in humors was not evident. Furthermore, the word *humor* as used by these later contemporaries had no more delimitation in meaning than it had before Jonson made his defintion in *Every Man out.* Satire in the Caroline comedies was relatively mild and incidental, and certain eccentric characters—the affected gallants, the would-be wits, the decrepit lovers, the roarers, the country gulls, the misers, etc.—appeared so often that they became stereotyped; the satiric import must have been to a great extent dissipated through constant repetition.

My study of the comedies of Ben Jonson and his contemporaries shows, then, that only two comedies, Jonson's *Every Man out of His Humor* and *Cynthia's Revels,* are sufficiently differentiated from other comedies of the period so that they may be classified as comedies of humors. Jonson's other comedies and those of his contemporaries show cognizance of the humors and occasional use of the techniques employed

to present humors in *Every Man out* and *Cynthia's Revels,* but no concern to carry on the type of play that Jonson offered in those two comedies.

VITA

Robert Van Akin Bauer was born December 13, 1914, at Naperville, Illinois. After attending public schools there, he entered North Central College in 1933 and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1937. In 1937-38 he did graduate work at the University of Illinois as a Scholar in English and was granted the degree of Master of Arts The following year he began study for the doctorate as a Fellow in English. Since the fall of 1939 he had been an Assistant in English at the University of Illinois, except for a period of military service from July, 1942, until February, 1946.